

HIV / AIDS

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On September 11, 1997, Rep. Dennis Hastert (R-IL) proposed an amendment to a yealy appropriations act that would prohibit the use of federal funds for needle exchange programs. The amendment passed the House, but the terms of the amendment changed during conference between the House and the Senate, with the final version of the bill limiting the use of federal funds for needle exchange programs until March 31, 1998, when the Secretary of Health and Human Services would gain the option to fund needle exchange programs under certain conditions.

Rep. Waxman spoke in the House in opposition to the amendment. His statement followed an argument from Rep. Tom Coburn (R-OK) that needle exchange programs would promote the use of illicit drugs.

DEPARTMENTS OF LABOR, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, AND EDUCATION, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 1998 September 11, 1997

The Congressional Record

Rep. Henry A. Waxman

The problem in the argument that was just advanced by the gentleman from Oklahoma [Mr. Coburn], is that even if we found that the use of a needle exchange program could reduce the incidence of AIDS , even if we found that there would not be more drug use, but in fact people might then be encouraged to go into programs to shake their addiction, we would prohibit, if this amendment were adopted, the use of Federal funds, by the decision of the local health people, to be used for a needle exchange program. We would be saying to the local people, at their discretion, that under no circumstances could they use this tool of a needle exchange program to prevent the spread of HIV.

Now, I find it surprising that people who say we ought to use Federal funds at the discretion of local governments to take the opposite position when a needle exchange program is involved.

But before local public health agencies can even decide to have a needle exchange program, the law says the Secretary of HHS must make two findings: The Secretary of Health and Human Services must find that a needle exchange reduces the spread of HIV and that the needle exchange program does not cause any increase in illegal drug use.

The amendment before us would strike the ability of the Secretary to get this information and possibly make this finding. It would say under no circumstances, we do not care what the evidence may tell us, will we allow a needle exchange program at the discretion of the local public health officials.

This is short-sighted. These are the kinds of short-sighted decisions that have kept us from approaching this AIDS epidemic with all the tools at our disposal. We should not let the decision be made by people in the Congress, who do not have the evidence but who have a lot of fears about how their views will be interpreted as to whether it is politically correct from the point of view of an opponent who may attack a distorted statement of those views. We ought to let these decisions be made on a scientific basis.

